

Full Metal Panic!

Irrelevant Emotion

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"CUT IT OUT ALREADY!"
A GIRL IN LOVE, MIZUKI'S FEELINGS
FLY UP IN THE AIR ALONG WITH
THE OCTOPUS-SAUSAGE!



**Full Metal Panic!
AN UNDEPENDABLE BOOK OF LAWS?**

Translator's Forward:

The following is a short story from the book "Ate ni Naranai Roppou Zensho?" (An Undependable Book of Laws?). We will return to your regularly scheduled COMO soon- this is only a break for those wanting a little humor (myself included). Enjoy ^^(?)

Irrelevant Emotion:

It was a dismal after-school afternoon.

The sun smoldered, and the air was dry.

The head of the Karate Club, Issei Tsubaki, walked energetically down a tree-lined street off campus.

Despite his fair-skinned complexion and diminutive stature, he was nevertheless a fearless warrior. His slit eyes and tightly drawn mouth were impressive. One could see the spirit of an inexhaustible, quiet fighter burning brightly in those eyes.

He was on his way to a duel.

This afternoon, in spite of his repeated failures, he had sent another letter of challenge to Sousuke Sagara. No matter what he did, he just couldn't suppress his feelings of wanting a rematch.

Ever since he was very young, he had worked to improve his skills despite his various handicaps- height, weight, vision. Conquering the deficiencies which had turned into an overflowing inferiority complex, he single-mindedly pursued power. In order for him to set his sights even higher, he had to somehow defeat Sousuke, who had beaten him.

(That's right... ever since the day I lost to him, I've become a man who can't take one step forward. But that ends today. Today for sure, I'm gonna-)

Issei's eyes grew large.

(Beat Sagara!)

As if stirred up by the warrior's energy, a whirlwind suddenly appeared around him, kicking up dust and leaves all around him.

Before long, Issei arrived at the spot for the match. The remains of where they had demolished a judo hall a few days before. He couldn't see anyone yet. It seemed that he had arrived before the agreed time.

That's when Issei suddenly noticed.

There was something strange on the zelkova tree right next to him. On its trunk, which was about the same thickness as his chest, he found a white piece of paper attached with an army knife.

On the piece of paper, there seemed to be a long message.

(...?)

Issei, who was near-sighted, couldn't really see what was written on it. He walked up to the tree, and squinting, read the message.

"To Issei Tsubaki:

I did receive your letter of challenge.

However, as I have an important mission for the student council today, I cannot fight you.

I'm sorry, but I have sent a *foot soldier* in my place." (?)

(Foot soldier...?)

About halfway through the letter, just as he shifted his weight a little bit-Ka-ching.

From under his foot in the ground, something made a dull, metallic sound. Although he was getting a very bad feeling, he continued to read, and found the explanation as to the nature of the sound.

"-if you have already heard the metallic sound, it would be advisable not to lift your leg. There's an anti-personnel land mine underneath. If you take your foot off, it will explode."

"Wh...!?"

He looked down at his foot.

Trembling with fear, he carefully leaned over. He turned up a little of the dirt from under his worn-out sneaker. A land mine about the size of a CD peeked back out at him.

Now shaking all over, he read the remainder of the report.

"-Use this army knife to try and dismantle the mine without moving your foot. If you manage to successfully disarm it and survive, you have won.

That is all.

Good luck to you.

Sousuke Sagara"

Issei, clinging to the trunk of the tree, howled out in a bitter voice, "Sagara... y-you've done it again!!"

At around the same time, Sousuke Sagara, with a serious face and focused very intently on his work, stapled a bundle of paper together. A mountain of finished copies had formed on top of the large desk in the student council room. This was his "very important mission" right now.

That was because they were in the middle of producing this month's bulletin- the "Jindai High News".

Sousuke and several other students were silently absorbed in their work, and there was little conversation because of the gloomy atmosphere.

Just as he had finished 200 copies- there was the sound of an explosion in the distance. The echo reverberated like thunder, rattling the windows of the student council room as they shook- then the silence soon returned.

"...?"

While the other students were raising their eyebrows, Sousuke alone closed his eyes.

"So he failed..."

Kaname Chidori gave him a puzzled look.

"What are you talking about? What was that sound just now?"

"Don't worry about it. Somewhere far off, a lone man has fallen in battle... that is all," he said solemnly, then punched the stapler again.

"Ah... strange."

Kaname sullenly returned back to work.

After a while, one of the girl students helping on the bulletin- Mizuki Inaba, complained, "God... why do I have to work on this boring crap? I don't have anything to do with the student council."

She had a semi-long straight haircut. Although her facial features were diminutive and cherubic, she had the stubbornness of a fox. Many members of the student council were out today because of work, club activities or chores. Since they were shorthanded, Kaname had forced Mizuki to come as she was going home at the end of the day.

"Stop complaining. You owe me for lots of things, anyway. You had free time today, didn't you?"

"Hmph, well excuse me if I spend my empty youth with nothing to do but watch reruns of 'Shadow Army- The Bakumatsu Chapter', since all I do is go home and I don't have a boyfriend." (?)

"I see..."

"I can't stand it. Maname and Madoka and Shouko, they all got boyfriends recently and that's all they talk about."

"Your friends from middle school?"

"Yeah. Those three idiots. We hadn't seen each other in such a long time, and that's all they talked about for three hours when we met up at Mos Burger. Even though they knew my circumstances. It really ticked me off. I wonder if I should tell their boyfriends their embarrassing little secrets." (?)

"You're the same, nice person as ever, aren't you..." Kaname had said in a shocked voice, when the door of the student council room burst open violently.

"?"

"Sagaaaaa!!" screamed someone leaning against the doorframe- one ragged, dusty, Issei Tsubaki.

He looked terrible. He was completely covered in soot and scratches, his uniform was singed all over, and smoke was rising from his head.

"Ah, Tsubaki. What's up?" greeted Kaname, but Issei didn't seem to notice. He adjusted his cracked glasses to confirm Sousuke's figure, and just as he said, "I'll kill you!", he rushed headlong at Sousuke. At the same time, Sousuke stood up from his seat just in time to miss the outstretched fist that came at him as fast as an arrow. The mountain of booklets collapsed with a thud, and the air was full of flying papers.

"I see you're alive. You have respectable stamina."

"Shut up! I definitely will never forgive you for today!"

"You lost when it blew up."

"That's not your decision!"

"I understand, so let's do this tomorrow. I am working on the news bulletins-"

"I don't give a damn!!"

Sousuke ran lightly around the room as Issei mercilessly took blows at him. Since it was an unarmed fight, Sousuke and Issei were about even, but it didn't seem too difficult for Sousuke to avoid Issei's angry and uncontrolled attacks.

"Ah, they're at it again..."

Kaname scratched the back of her head. She didn't know what to do about the animosity between the two of them.

"What's going on? Who's the mad guy with glasses...? This is rather annoying," Mizuki said with an annoyed look on her face.

"Yeah. He's a guy we've known for a while now. He's been involved with Sousuke about something..."

"Hmm. So, they always joke around like this?"

"Yeah. Well, it's a bit extreme on the aggressive side to be called 'joking around' ...but this isn't the time to talk about it... hey you two, cut it out."

"Take that! And that!"

"Hello... hey. Tsubaki!!" she scolded him, and Issei noticed Kaname's presence for the first time.

"Chi... Chidori?"

He stopped his fist in mid-flight, and his facial expression was suddenly agreeable. He seemed extremely embarrassed to have been distracted in the presence of Kaname.

Sousuke didn't miss his opportunity. A moment had scarcely passed when he drove a sharp kick into his opponent's stomach.

"Guh...!"

Issei, who narrowly managed to put his arms up in time to guard against the blow, went flying in the direction of Kaname and the others who had taken shelter next to the window. Kaname barely avoided being hit by his back, but Mizuki, who was standing up behind her, was hit dead on by the blow.

"Aaah...!"

That's when the accident happened.

Mizuki was knocked backwards, and after staggering for a moment, she fell across the window frame.

They were on the fourth floor.

"Ah...?"

She flipped over and fell out of the window. Her small body was headed headfirst into the asphalt ten meters below when-

"Kh...!"

Just as Mizuki had started to fall, Issei grabbed her ankles at the last moment with a "gsh!" His upper body was hanging out of the window and both of his feet were braced as he held onto Mizuki like an upside-down fish.

"Aa... YAAAAAAA~!!" she screamed after a second. She flapped her hands around for a few moments, then checking her improperly inverted skirt, started wriggling and twisting around.

"Haah!? Aah!? Noooo~!!"

"D... don't move around!"

"Let me go, let me go! ...no no no, don't let go don't let go don't let go!!"

"I'm not! I'm not letting go! So calm down! Be still!"

Issei looked desperate, holding onto Mizuki's ankles with both hands. He somehow managed to turn around to try and ask someone for help.

When he noticed, Sousuke made his way over to Issei.

"Sa-Sagara...?"

"Your hands are tied up with this, Tsubaki."

"What!?"

"If you let go, Mizuki will die. In other words, you can no longer avoid my attacks... checkmate."

"Y-you bastard..."

"Admit your defeat like a man. Otherwise-"

Whack!

Kaname punched him vehemently from the side, knocking Sousuke down. She was ghastly pale, and sternly pointing at Issei over at the window, said "Help him! Save them!"

"Roger."

Quickly getting up, Sousuke willingly lent a hand. Kaname joined in as they carefully lifted Mizuki up. Somehow, everything turned out okay.

"Hmm... that was almost a close call."

"You jerk!"

Kaname came back to her senses and knocked Sousuke down.

"That hurts."

"Shut up! You nearly sent Mizuki to the next life, you know that!? Taking advantage of an opportunity to attack Tsubaki- are you for real!? Why do you always think of such cowardly methods of fighting!? All the basic connections in your brain are shorted out!"

"You think so?"

"Yes! Go and see the electronics guy at the stores in front of the station on your way home! ...really, when it comes to you, you're the most hopeless, absurd, stupid, dumba** idiotic-"

Kaname scolded Sousuke, who could only defend himself. Mizuki, who had flopped down on the floor, was sitting absentmindedly beside this all too familiar scene. She was dazed and confused, taking in the shock of how she almost died-

"Hey... are you okay?" asked Issei, who had regained his composure, as he waved his right hand around. Half asleep, she looked up at his face.

When she did, Mizuki's eyes widened.

"Eh..."

Issei had lost his glasses sometime during the commotion. When she looked at his real face, with its light complexion and noble features, Mizuki's attitude suddenly changed. Normally obstinate, Mizuki's eyes instantly and feverishly teared up, and a sigh escaped from her small lips.

"I'm sorry. Are you hurt?"

"U... uh. ...I'm ...fine," Mizuki barely managed to answer. Again, this came out in a thin voice unimaginable from Mizuki.

"I see. Then it's alright."

Issei stood up and turned toward Sousuke, who was still being admonished.
"Hey... Sagara. I'm tired today. I'll overlook this. But... next time, I won't show any mercy."

"Umm."

"Prepare yourself," he said over his shoulder, and with a drawn-up face, he started to leave the student council room. Then Kaname said after him, "Wait, Tsubaki!"

"Wh... what is it, Chidori?"

"Please stop doing such dangerous things. Even at the best of times, we have a walking-time bomb in here."

"I... I'm sorry. See ya later..."

Issei nodded a little, then, looking embarrassed, left the room. For some reason, he only acted strange around Kaname.

"Good grief... hey, Mizuki, you alright?"

"Yeah... I'm fine," she said, nodding half-absentmindedly.

"Really? You're acting strange."

"Yeah. I guess I seem strange..."

"Huh?"

"That guy, his name is Tsubaki, huh... What a wonderful name. Very cool. What else... yeah, groovy, soulful, even cute catch to it. Very strong. But tender. So cool..."

As if she were praying to the heavens in the night sky, Mizuki absorbedly stood with both hands clasped together.

Kaname unconsciously took a step back.

"Th, this is..."

Mizuki had completely moved into "love at first sight" mode.

The next morning, Issei, wearing a long face, was walking by himself to school.

He met up with other students in his class, but they only greeted him lightly. Although he was always furious in front of Sousuke, he was normally a rather quiet person who exuded a chilly ambiance.

His classmates perceived him as a cool, handsome man with an air of isolated aloofness... (actually, that evaluation was changing due to the recent fights with Sousuke).

Right now, that same guy was lost in his thoughts of "what should I do in an honest fight with Sagara..." and so on, when he reached the street corner-

"Watch out!"

Just then a girl appeared from the corner and barreled into Issei with a shoulder tackle.

"Wha...!?"

The attack took him completely by surprise, and he fell down into the road. He quickly raised himself up and scowled at the culprit.

"!! W-what the hell were you doing all the sud... den?"



The girl was the second year student that had almost fallen to her death just the day before. He didn't really know her name, but- she was certainly called Mizuki or something like that.

She was also sitting on the ground, tightly clutching her ankle and saying in a somewhat monotone voice, "Ouch ouch ouch. Ouuuuch. I sprained my ankle... or perhaps it's a comminuted fracture?"

She turned to look at him as she was talking. "Ah. You're that guy from yesterday..."

"Y... yeah."

"What a coincidence that we meet at a time like this."

"..."

Issei, who didn't understand her intentions, was at a complete loss for a reply. In spite of the awkward silence, Mizuki shamelessly held out both hands.

"?"

"Piggy-back."

"Wh... what?"

"Carry me. I can't walk."

For exactly three seconds, Issei's mouth hung half-open as if he were senile, then-

"Do-don't be stupid. Why do I have to... with a girl like you, who I don't even know that well-"

"Ah! It hurts, it hurts, it hurts!!" she yelled out brazenly, suddenly remembering to clutch her ankle. She carried on without any regard for the commuters who were staring at them.

"H, hey...!?"

"My leg huuurts! I was pushed by Issei Tsubaki, a second year student in group 8 at Jindai High School! I can't walk! My ability to move is zero! And I have Mr. Fujisaki for Classical

Literature in an hour! I'll be late! And he'll count me absent! I'll fail! Then I'll have to take it over! It's all over for me-!"

"Cu... cut it out! I got it!" Issei replied after wondering whether he should run for it. When he said this, she suddenly stopped crying and glanced up at him.

"Really...?"

"What? Uh... well."

"Then carry me."

Her face changed into a grin, and she stretched out her arms.

"That Issei Tsubaki came to school today with a girl from second year. And he was carrying her piggy-back."

Kaname heard this rumor from Kyouko Tokiwa at lunch break that day.

"It's true! They seem really friendly," said her classmate, Kyouko Tokiwa, going into gossipy-wife mode. "Since Mizuki was huffing and puffing after Tsubaki, Tsubaki wasn't very happy, and then right there they broke out into a passionate flamenco dance... or something. No, well, it's just a rumor."

"Th-that was fast... extremely fast," Kaname said, more or less surprised at the speed of Mizuki's actions. The way she could get things done, as well as her fierce beliefs- those were her real abilities. Kaname admired those aspects of that girl with which she couldn't physically compete.

Sousuke, who was beside them listening to their conversation, made a difficult face and put his hand up to his chin.

"So, Tsubaki and Inaba touched...? That's a strange relationship. Is there some sort of conspiracy..."

"...it's not like that, is it? Besides, that hard-line Tsubaki, he's never been as fast as this... it's unusual."

Kyouko looked at Kaname with deep emotion.

"Yeah, I reckoned that he liked you."

"Ha ha ha, no way... but, it's okay, isn't it? I think that kind of relationship is interesting.

As for me, I'm like, 'I hope you two are happy'."

"Ahh. That's pretty frank of you."

"Really? Why's that?"

Just then, the subject of their conversation, Issei Tsubaki, noisily clamored into their classroom. His exhausted face looked as far away from "happy" as it could be.

"...?"

Without even looking around the room at all, he quickly hid behind the door. It wasn't long before Mizuki came running down the corridor outside.

(Isseiiii? Where did you gooo?)

When her footsteps had passed, Issei hung his head and took a deep breath.

"Tsubaki, what are you doing?" Kyouko asked, and he was startled to notice Kaname and Kyouko there for the first time.

"No... nothing. It's nothing."

"We heard that you were going out with Mizuki? That's great," Kaname said, and Issei shook his head violently.

"No... no we're not. That's not true!"

"Huh? But that's what everyone's saying."

"It's a misunderstanding! That girl's the one tagging along after me... Chidori... if even you're saying something like that, I... I..." he said, being frank beyond what was necessary.

"Ha ha ha, you don't have to be so shy about it."

"Chidori...!"

His face started to drain to a dreadful color, when-

"Ah, there you are!" Mizuki, who had seen him from the doorway when she was coming back, yelled brightly.

"...damn."

"Mmm, really, Issei! Why are you hanging out here!? Didn't you promise that you'd eat lunch with me?!"

"When did I promise that!?" said Issei, raising his voice, but Mizuki paid no attention to it.

He blushed and fidgeted around.

"Oh ho ho... how cute. You're being shy."

"Listen to what people say!"

She disregarded this also, sidled up to him and excitedly held out a lunch box.

"By the way, this morning I got up early so I could make something especially for you."

"But I just got to know you this morning...!?"

"It's okay! Don't worry about details! Now, eat up."

Just as she said this, Mizuki opened the lunchbox in her hands and grabbed an octopus vienna sausage with her chopsticks.

"That's unusual. Mizuki can cook, too..."

"It's octopus... it's made of octopus. I wonder what that tastes like...?" Kaname and Sousuke mumbled unanimously from where they watched.

"Okay, aaaaah ♡" Mizuki said in a sweet voice as she offered the sausage. Unable to control himself any longer, Issei violently knocked it aside with his right hand.

"Cut it out already!"

"Ah..."

The octopus sausage flew up in the air, then hit the floor with a squish.

"Stop following me around! It gets on my nerves! Thanks to you there's all these weird rumors flying around about us!"

"..."

"Got it? I won't hit a woman, but... if you keep this up, even I won't show mercy!" Issei said in a threatening voice, and an awkward silence fell over the room. Mizuki hung her head in silence. Kaname and Kyouko felt uneasy. And Sousuke was staring in earnest at the octopus sausage that had rolled on the floor.

A few moments passed.

Mizuki's eyes gradually filled with tears.

"I understand. After all, I was almost killed by you..."

"Wh-what?"

"When I almost dropped from the window, I was scared... the heart defect that I've had all my life just couldn't take the stress. PTSD. Posttraumatic stress disorder. I may never recover."

Mizuki whimpered and sniffed. Issei looked uncomfortable, and said hastily, "I... I'm sorry about that. But you know, it really wasn't me that..."

"And you even looked at my panties, too."



"Uh..."

"My panties. You saw them, then, right? You can't deny it even though it suddenly slipped your mind."

"N-no. I... since I had lost my glasses then, I just could barely *see something*... no, that's not it. I'm innocent...!"

Issei looked around himself in panic.

The students in the classroom, which included Kaname, had heard Mizuki's story, and were whispering. It seemed like they were all gossiping back and forth to each other (incidentally, Sousuke was fixated on the sausage on the floor, looking somewhat distressed).

"You push a girl down, look at her panties against her will, then pretend not to know anything about it? How horrible. Why are all men that way..."

"I-I apologize about that. I'm sorry."

"...really?"

"Y...yeah."

As soon as he answered this, Mizuki recovered, said, "Okay then, open up," and grabbing an omelet this time from the lunch box, held it out to him as she grinned.

"Why me..."

Issei, now moved to tears, and in view of everyone around him, took a small bite of the omelet.

After school, as Sousuke was getting ready to go home, Issei came into the classroom. It seemed that he had somehow shaken Mizuki, because he was alone.

"Come with me."

"...?"

Another duel, this guy doesn't learn his lesson... were the various things that Sousuke thought as he followed after him. They went up on the rooftop of the north school building, where Issei turned to Sousuke and quietly began to talk.

"Sagara. You're a string-puller, right...?"

"What's that?"

"That Inaba-girl. You hired her to harass me, didn't you!?"

"No. I don't know anything about it," Sousuke answered. Tsubaki stared fixedly at him.

"...you're telling the truth, huh?"

"It would be no use to lie about it."

Issei let out a rare sigh.

"It's true... when I think about it, you probably wouldn't use a method like this to attack me. If that's so... damn. She's serious, that girl," he muttered to himself, hitting his fist into the palm of his other hand. Sousuke thought about it, then asked, "Is there a problem?"

"There's a huge problem!"

"Was it such a problem that she turned lunch into a feast? Of course, that octopus-sausage wasn't as good as expected, but..."

You ate it, didn't you?

...and unfortunately, there's no one who can prove you did, but-

"You idiot. Try having a girl you barely know hanging off of you and arbitrarily acting like your wife. You wouldn't stand for it. These rumors that I'm sweet on women that are going around, and Chidori misunderstanding them... it's horrible," Issei muttered hopelessly. For the one

day that he had known Mizuki, he looked extremely worn out. But Sousuke, in an indifferent tone of voice, said, "I see. That's too bad. If our business is concluded, I'm going home."

Sousuke then hurriedly started to leave when Issei grabbed his arm with a "gash".

"Wait."

"What is it?"

"You're also responsible for how this turned out. Don't act like this isn't your business...!"

"I am? Responsibility? I don't understand what you're talking about."

"And don't act like an idiot! It's your fault she was almost knocked from the window!"

"Let me see..."

"Yo-you bastard, how long are you going to pretend not to understand...?"

The exasperated Issei started to take a hold of him, but he was more tired than he had imagined. When his attack was dodged, Issei staggered aimlessly and grabbed onto Sousuke's shoulders.

Right at that precise moment-

The entrance door to the roof opened with a "clang". The face they saw was that of Kyouko, holding some Pocky and a pair of binoculars. (?)

"Huh...?"

Kyouko's large eyes blinked from behind her dragonfly glasses.

When she saw Issei, clinging onto Sousuke's shoulders as if he were holding him back- she looked a little surprised.

"...?"

"I... I'm sorry. It seems I interrupted you guys."

Giving them a fake smile, Kyouko disappeared beyond the door.

"...what was that?"

"I don't know. Besides that, let go of me already."

"Hm? Oh."

Issei soon recovered himself, and let go of Sousuke.

"...in other words, Sagara, it's your fault that this girl has grabbed a hold of my weaknesses.

So help me out a little. We won't fight until then."

They were somewhat selfish remarks, but Sousuke couldn't come up with any objections.

Especially any reason to refuse.

"So I'll be helping you?"

"Don't argue. I'm desperate."

When he said this, Tsubaki's expression certainly seemed to give the impression of "a drowning man will catch a straw". Having to go so far as to rely on Sousuke, who could even be called an old enemy- his distress had to be quite acute. (?)

"Anyway, I'm listening for now, but what do you want?"

"I want that girl to lose interest in me, but... I'm in very unfamiliar territory. I don't know what to do. Do you have any good ideas?"

"Hmm..." Sousuke meditated on it. "That's it... what if you try beating an innocent pregnant woman or some old people to death in front of her? She would probably hate you then."

"Like I could do that!"

"But isn't your greatest asset beating people to death?" he said with too much frankness.

"My ability to control arterial circulation is the secret to killing you. Don't say such disgraceful things."

"But before I had the feeling that you said 'Assassin's Fist' or something like that..."

"Shut up. Anyway, we can't use that way," Issei said, and Sousuke folded his arms. Then in a somewhat optimistic tone of voice, Sousuke said, "Then I'll persuade her. I know Inaba a little..."

"Persuade her?"

"Correct. Dialogue is always the best means."

It was lunch break the following day.

Kaname and Kyouko were eating their lunches in the classroom, when Mizuki came in, looking depressed.

"Oh, Mizuki. You're not eating with Tsubaki?"

"I can't find him. He's not in the classroom or at home... and I even brought him a special homemade lunch today, too..." she said, sighing. "He's definitely shy, cause when he looks at my face, he gets all wound up, and looks up at the clouds somewhere. I like how charming he is when he does it. Ho ho ho..."

"..."

Kaname was deeply envious that despite only knowing each other for two days, she had the nerve to be able to say this.

Right then, Sousuke, who was sitting a little bit away biting into a bread roll, called out to Mizuki, "Inaba."

"What?"

"I have something important to tell you. Please come with me."

"...?"

Somehow, the atmosphere felt more serious than usual. Mizuki, although she looked rather dubious about it, stood up slowly and followed after Sousuke. Kaname stared blankly at their departing figures.

"Sousuke asked Mizuki to...? That's unusual. What's up with that?" Kaname mumbled, and Kyouko nodded a little.

"It certainly is... ah, that's right. You know Tsubaki and Sagara? Yesterday after school, I saw something very strange..."

"Strange?"

"Yeah, with Sagara and Tsubaki up on the roof. Even though they never seem to get along, they were talking, just the two of them. And it seemed very serious-"

Kyouko told her the detailed eye-witness account. The two of them had met up on the roof, out of sight of anyone. And for some reason- it looked like they were firmly embracing each other.

"...seriously?"

"Seriously. It felt like Tsubaki was holding Sagara back."

"Eeeh? But, but why all of the sudden..."

"I don't know. But the mood up there... I don't think it was something trivial."

"Sousuke and Issei were? Secretly meeting together and hugging..."

Kaname crossed her arms as the crease in her brow deepened.

What were they talking about? And what was Sousuke telling Mizuki...? When she thought about these, Kaname one theory came to her mind.

"Ah...!"

Kaname's face froze in shock. No way... no way... it couldn't be that!

"Kana, what is it?"

"I... I'm going to see for myself!" she said, then got up out of her seat.

When they had reached the stairs a little ways down from the classroom, Mizuki said, "...so, what is it? This important thing you have to tell me?"

"Yes. The truth is... it's about Tsubaki," Sousuke said as he stopped and turned to face her.

"Issei? What is it?"

"Be careful of the man."

"Huh?"

"An amateur like you probably wouldn't understand, but... he's dangerous. He's a bloodthirsty killer who gets untold pleasure from torturing and ripping innocent people to shreds."

"Huh?"

After some time passed, Sousuke, with complete sincerity, broke the silence.

"His past is stained in blood. He was only six years old when he realized for the first time he enjoyed killing. One day, when his father had become intoxicated and was beating his mother, he took a hunting rifle and shot him to death. He first shot him in the stomach, then when his father was begging for his life, he shot four bullets into his head."

"Ah, I see..."

"When he got his first taste for blood like that, he continued to murder in bizarre ways. It's said that 20 women have fallen victim to his vicious acts so far. From a four year old little girl, to a 90 year old woman- he sexually assaulted all of them, then killed them without mercy."

"E-even a 90 year old woman..."

"That's right. He shows no mercy to his prey," Sousuke said solemnly. "He has also blown up two aircrafts, assassinated ten important people from various countries, and stolen three bicycles. A blood-starved psychopath- that is Issei Tsubaki's true character."

"..."

"You understand now, right? Tsubaki is a hopeless villain. It would be better if you stopped all association with him from now on. If you don't-"

"Hey, would you just cut it out already!?" Mizuki suddenly broke into Sousuke's long narrative. "What are you trying to say... that I should break up with Issei?"

"That is correct."

"You must be joking! What gives you the right to say that to me!?"

"I-"

I was simply asked to- was what he would going to say, but before he could, another voice broke in.

"Mizuki... stop it."

It was Kaname.

Her eyes had lost their sparkle. Her steps were somewhat weak as she briskly made her to way over to them.

"Kaname. What do you need?"

More than likely, she had been listening to their conversation until then. Kaname looked at both of them with the blank stare characteristic of someone who had just received a terrible shock.

"I... I already know. What Sousuke wants. I'll tell you..."

"Oh."

"Hey, Mizuki. Sousuke's jealous..."

"Jealous? What are you talking about?"

Kaname suddenly broke into a nihilistic smile.

"Well... okay? I also didn't notice it until now, but... it seems Sousuke and Tsubaki get along very well. They usually go around hitting each other and blowing stuff up, but the truth is that they truly care about each other, definitely..."

Sousuke shook his head a little from side to side, saying, "No, that's impossible," but Kaname didn't take any heed, and continued, "Even I didn't know, but the two of them are friendly about *a lot of things*... they're secretive about it... that's why Sousuke couldn't bear the thought of you having Tsubaki all to yourself. That's why- that's why he's saying 'Break up' like this."

With an expression of little understanding, Mizuki put her hands together.

"I...is that so?"

"Yeah. I was surprised, too... when I looked at an almost unsociable person like Sousuke, I always thought 'What's funny about him?', but... of course, that's what it was..."

"? I don't understand what you're saying, but..."

Kaname ignored Sousuke, and took a deep breath.

"But of course, I think that kind of relationship is very weird... but if the two of them want it that strongly, we can't stop them. Those who would judge them... there are those people, right? I think that if they make other choices, and stray off the beaten path, they can live a happy life..."

"Chidori. What are you talking about?"

"No! Don't worry about it! I... I can still hang out with you just like we always have. I was just a little surprised... but, Sousuke? I think it's a mistake to push Tsubaki into that kind of life. After all, when this... a nice girl like Mizuki appears, they can do well, right? Shouldn't we see them off with dry eyes?"

"Kaname...? In other words, what are you trying to say?" Mizuki asked.

Kaname wiped the corner of her eye with her sleeve and pressed on, "Mm...it's okay. I'm fine now. It's because of that, Mizuki, that you don't need to worry. You and Tsubaki make a good couple, so good luck. Do your best!" Kaname said with all the feeling she could. Even though she felt as if she hadn't understood a single thing that Kaname had said, Mizuki's eyes grew wide at her friend's kind words.

"Thank you... *sniff* Kaname, you're such a good person... I'll do my best."

"Yes, yes. Good luck!"

The conversation had gone in an entirely different direction than originally planned, and when it had almost concluded-

"WHY! WHY DID IT TURN OUT LIKE THIS!?"

The person himself- Issei, appeared from the shadow of a nearby column.

His shoulders were heaving in and out.

Issei, who had been eavesdropping on the conversation from the very start, was confused by everything, while at the same time one step away from snapping.

When Sousuke had tried to "persuade" her, Issei had gotten extremely angry at the disturbing tall tale from beginning to end.

He was also at his wit's end at Mizuki's attitude, which gave no thought to his feelings, nor of how she was troubling him.

He was also extremely angry at Kaname, who had suddenly appeared and went on an unreasonable diatribe that turned the story completely around.

That's right- why was Kaname Chidori doing something like supporting Inaba? For him, that was just the most miserable thing imaginable.

"Tsubaki. What is it?" Kaname asked with a somewhat sympathetic smile.

"Why is it... Chidori... why-"

He couldn't say anymore.

Ever since that day when he had met her in that back alley, and she put the band aid on his fist, a faint longing had grown inside him. A blinding light had shone on the simple youth who had devoted himself to only becoming stronger. And that had been Kaname Chidori.

Needless to say, he had no interest in talking about it like ordinary guys. He was satisfied if her smiling face could reach him from afar.

But still. That extremely sneaky, war-obsessed idiot was always with her. And a foolhardy love-obsessed idiot was hanging around him. Everything in the world seemed to be trying to keep Kaname from him-

Was it fate?

If so, he had to fight that fate. That's what he had done so far in overcoming his various weaknesses.

That's right. He wouldn't run away.

His feelings toward Kaname... he should tell them right now, in this place.

It would probably embarrass Kaname. And probably hurt Mizuki. As for Sagara- he had no clue. Oh well, he didn't care about that idiot, anyway.

(Okay...I'm going to tell her!)

Issei Tsubaki decided.

IMAGINATION



This was the climax of life. A once in a lifetime challenge. When it came to battles, conversation was just another type. Issei, who had almost withered in these few days, burned with fighting spirit.

"What is it, Issei? You haven't said anything..."

"Okay, you guys..."

In order to tell his true feelings, Issei slowly took off his massive glasses, exposing his two sharp eyes. Because of his nearsightedness, all three of them became blurry figures, but he didn't care.

"Listen up... Chidori, Inaba. You're mistaken."

"...?"

"I don't intend to go out with Inaba. I'm sorry, but look somewhere else."

"Wh... why? But I-"

"Cause there's someone else I like!" he declared in a voice that carried very well.

Mizuki froze up like she had just been struck by lightning, and Kaname dropped her eyes bitterly.

"Ever since we met, I've secretly felt this way. I would die for this person. I seriously love this person that much. So I couldn't even consider hanging around a girl in the same vicinity."

"...wh-who is it? This person..." Mizuki asked. Her voice was tearful.

"They're right here."

"Huh..."

In order to suppress his nervousness, he took a deep breath- then brazenly and clearly pointed at the person of which he spoke.

"!!"

Everyone gulped at once.

"That's right! Now you know. You're the one I like!"

"Ah... it can't be..."

"It's too much! Oh no..."

"Tsubaki... you..."

The three of them said at the same time. After a short silence, Kaname said in a shaky voice, "Ts... Tsubaki."

"I know this is inconvenient, but I can't stop these feelings. Somehow... somehow, find a way to understand."

"Of course... that's what it was. I heard about the matter on the roof yesterday from Kyouko... so... I didn't think it was like that... But you've stated it so clearly now... I don't know whether to support you or not... it's confusing."

"...what?"

Then Mizuki followed with, "I didn't know that it was like that... don't tell me you two... are more than just friends..."

"...huh?"

Frowning at their strange reactions, Issei slowly put his glasses back on.

The world suddenly came back into focus.

In front of his pointing finger, in the area where he had just shouted, "I like you"- Stood Sousuke Sagara.

"Gross! How dirty!!"

Mizuki ran away crying. After he watched her leave, Sousuke said, as he broke out into a cold sweat, ".....uh. What... this is a problem."

Issei couldn't speak, and instead could only stand there, opening and closing his mouth like a goldfish.

After that day, rumors of the "Sagara-Tsubaki love conspiracy" spread around the school as fast as an arrow. This subject persisted for more than several weeks, and became the spice of the girl students' idle gossip.

The biggest controversy became the question of "Sagara and Tsubaki, who gives it and who takes it?" When Kaname swung the conversation in this direction with a cheerful Kyouko-
"Hmm, I wonder? Both of them look like they'd take it. Well... that's just what I've seen, though," she answered, then looked at the two, who were quarrelling, and laughed.

(This is all your fault!)

(Don't blame others)

(Shut up! Get down on your knees and apologize!!)

(It was your mistake!)

There was Issei, crying as he waved his fists around, and Sousuke, who deftly avoided his attacks.

The other students watched the two with uncomfortable stares.

The End

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